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## PETRONIUS: A STUDY IN ANCIENT REALISM.

THE Latin novelist, Petronius, of the first century of our era, has been strangely neglected, as it seems to me. In our latest, and in other respects our best, history of the early novel even his name is not mentioned. It is a perilous thing to discuss the work of an author whose life and writings are so little known to the general public; and when even the professional student of literary history ignores his existence, it is like flying in the face of Providence. But the important position which Petronius holds as the creator of a new *genre* of literature may properly justify the imprudence. Furthermore the small circle of his admirers is likely to be enlarged in the near future, since an excellent translation into English of a portion of his work has appeared within the last few months, and he may at last be rescued from the obscurity in which he languishes.

Perhaps it is not quite correct to say that the facts in the life of Petronius are not widely known to-day. Whoever has read the "Quo Vadis," of Sienkiewicz, his great Polish follower in the field of prose fiction, will know what manner of man Petronius was, and many of us who remember the incident where the hero of "Quo Vadis" purchases at the bookshop of Avirnus a copy of his "Satyricon" for a friend, Vinicius, bidding him keep the author's name a secret, may wonder whether the book has survived the wreck of the Roman Empire, and, if it has, what its character and value are. A part of it has come down to us, perhaps a fourth or fifth of the entire work. In subject and in treatment it is exactly such a production as one would expect from the pen of a man like Petronius. The reader will remember in the novel of Sienkiewicz the closing hours of the life of Petronius. The description is founded upon fact, for it is based upon the pages of the historian Tacitus. After holding securely for a long time the unique position of director in chief of the imperial pleasures under the capri-

cious voluptuary, Nero, Petronius at last saw another supplant him in the emperor's favor. Knowing that his days were numbered, he decided not to wait for the inevitable sentence of death, but, inviting his friends to dinner, he opened one or more of his veins and passed away in the enjoyment of those pleasures to which he had given so many years of his life; and it was characteristic of the man that he bound up the wounds when the conversation took a turn which interested him, and that, as Tacitus tells us, he did not pass these last hours in discoursing on the immortality of the soul and the teachings of the sages, but in listening to the recital of gay and trifling verses. This is the only information of present interest which the ancients have left us concerning the great Roman realist. Perhaps it would help us to a more intelligent understanding of his work to sketch in somewhat fully, as a background to this impressionist view of Petronius, which Tacitus gives us, a picture of the times in which he lived; but a few words must suffice upon this point.

In the period of one hundred years which intervened between the middle of the first century B.C. and the middle of the first century A.D. Roman life and character had undergone tremendous changes of a social, political, and religious nature. The beginning of this period is distinguished by the completion of Pompey's conquests in the East, and the consequent influx into Rome of thousands of Greeks and Orientals, who brought with them, to undermine the comparatively simple life of the Roman, the standards of luxury of the ancient and effete civilizations. Many of these people were slaves, and the cheapness of their labor soon drove the peasant proprietors from the country districts of Italy to Rome, to swell the number of idle men already in the metropolis. The Romans were quick also to appreciate the opportunities which the Orient offered them for making fortunes, and the Eastern provinces were soon filled with Roman taxgatherers, traders, and bankers, who came back ultimately to spend their money in Italy with all the prodigality which the exaggerated Oriental ideas of luxury could develop in parvenus. Political changes at home and abroad

in this period were almost as marked as economic changes. The brain and brawn of every citizen had been needed in the early struggles of Rome for existence, and in her later contests for supremacy with rivals like Carthage. But at the beginning of our era Rome's enemies abroad were not to be feared, and the men who protected her far-away frontiers were no longer the citizens who left the field and the bench to return to them later with the addition of those forceful qualities which come from military discipline, but professional soldiers who passed their lives in the provinces. In civil life the emperor had gained so complete a mastery that there was no longer any outlet for the political ambition of the man of genius, nor any opportunity for the average citizen to gratify his natural desire for a part in the control of affairs. A religion with a strong spiritual or moral tendency like Judaism might have stemmed the tide setting toward selfishness and materialism, but as a writer upon morals has remarked, "the Roman religion, though in its best days an admirable system of moral discipline, was never an independent source of moral enthusiasm." In the period we are considering the Roman had outgrown his religion.

The extension of his horizon, and an acquaintance with more highly developed religious and philosophical systems had shown him the narrowness and puerility of his own faith, and as yet nothing had come to take its place. As a result of the social conditions which developed out of these changes men's thoughts were turned in upon themselves, and their lives were given over to the gratification of their personal tastes. The literature of the period reflected the temper of the times as a literature always does. The age of heroic achievement which could furnish an inspiration to lofty flights of the Muse was past. The labored efforts of Lucan in writing an epic on the civil war, and the artificial tragedies of Seneca, illustrate this fact for the generation of Petronius, if any illustration is needed. It was a period of introspection, when each man's thoughts were limited to himself and those about him, when he had no share and no

interest in the greater concerns of politics or religion or philosophy. The realistic romance dealing with the affairs of everyday life is the natural product of such a state of society, and it was under such circumstances that the great realistic novel of Petronius, which is also, I think, the earliest known romance of any sort, saw the light of day. It is a significant fact that prose fiction made its appearance after every other independent form of literature in prose and poetry had come into existence and lived its life, so to speak. The same statement may be made of the development of romance among the Greeks and in modern times. Prose fiction always seems to spring up in an imitative rather than in a creative literary period. As I have already said, only a portion of the work of Petronius is extant, but even the part left us forms an invaluable contribution to the literature of prose fiction, and furnishes a striking proof of the genius of its author.

The action of the story in its complete form, as the contemporaries of Petronius had it, took place in certain Italian and provincial towns. Three principal episodes of considerable length have come down to us, and in them the scene is laid in two Italian towns. Some one has said that our own novelist Howells was the first writer to reproduce accurately the local color of different towns within the borders of the same country. I am afraid that Howells' supporters must yield to Petronius his claim to this distinction. When one follows the hero in the novel of Petronius from the shores of the bay of Naples, where the scene is at first laid, to Croton, in Southern Italy, he comes into an entirely different atmosphere. He passes out of the circle of Rome's influence. The provincial aristocracy of the little Campanian village, making its crude attempts to imitate the manners of the metropolis, gives place to the elegant depravity of a town which was essentially Greek in its mode of life, and the differences which existed between the two types of society are presented in so subtle a fashion that even a close student, like Zola, of the characteristics which society of the same grade shows in different modern cities might ad-

mire the result. The hero of the romance is a Greek freedman who lives by his wits. Gathered about him in the story is a picturesque group of adventurers, parvenus, tradesmen, professional poets, fortune hunters, and petty provincial magistrates. It is an interesting fact that in this novel of Petronius women for the first time, in so far as I know, play an important part in literature. The narrative literature of the earlier period deals mainly with the doings of men and their relations to one another, and it is primarily addressed to men. A late writer has acutely surmised that the romance of chivalry was written for women, and that we owe to them the beginnings of the modern novel. What has just been noted of the "Satiræ" of Petronius would indicate the same origin for the ancient novel with equal probability.

In Greek and Roman epic and tragic poetry a primary motive was regularly employed which is not regarded as essential in modern literature; I mean the wrath of an offended deity or the un pitying action of fate. It is true that heredity in the prose dramas of Ibsen and society in many of the so-called problem novels of to-day serve the same dramatic purpose, but that element is not an *essential* one with us, and a modern author in composing a piece of imaginative literature would not feel bound to introduce it. We are likely, therefore, to forget that it *was* an essential factor with the Romans. Although he was creating a new form of literature, Petronius observes literary conventions in introducing this factor. The mishaps of his rascally hero are due to the anger of Priapus, who was as much an object of ridicule as of reverence among the Romans. The introduction of this motive and the choice of this god as the offended deity give a unity to the story, and make it a delightful satire upon the epic. The hero, Encolpius, driven by his rascalities from one town to another, becomes a realistic Odysseus. The book satisfies our modern conception of a novel, then, in having a well-defined plot, and it may also truly be said of it, I think, that each incident is a natural result of the action of two forces, the character of the hero and his environment. It

must be confessed, however, that the development of the plot is not followed out as continuously in this ancient novel as it is in a modern one. Long episodes are introduced which do not help along the action, and the movement is frequently interrupted by literary disquisitions or by poems.

In one important particular the novel of Petronius stands apart from all ancient imaginative literature and takes its place by the side of our latest modern fiction; I mean in its realism. This is true of its individual incidents, of its portrayal of contemporaneous society, and of the way in which the various characters are presented. I have already mentioned the skill of Petronius in reproducing local color. But since the treatment is intensely realistic, while we have a true picture of a certain class, the romance of Petronius gives us a one-sided view of contemporaneous society, just as realistic novels of the same type do to-day. The realistic treatment which Petronius has given to his novel puts it in marked contrast to the early Greek romances, which appeared somewhat later. "The Marvelous Things beyond Thule" is a fair specimen of these productions. The hero and the heroine in this story, Dinias and Dercyllis by name, after surviving perils at the hands of robbers, assassins, and magicians; after witnessing murders, suicides, and resurrections; having exhausted the possibilities of adventure from Hades to the North Pole—are finally transported to the moon to round off their experiences.

I am not aware that any one has called attention to the fact that the modern realistic novel made its first appearance under circumstances very similar to those under which the romance of Petronius was written. It is equally remarkable that in both cases the same phase of society is represented. The state of society in Spain in the sixteenth century, when the picaresque novel appeared, was the same as that of Italy in the first century of our era. In both countries the old aristocracy had disappeared, and a plutocracy had taken its place. The importation of slave labor had driven its peasant proprietors out of the country districts of Italy, while in Spain a similar result was produced by the heavy taxes which made agriculture unprofitable. The Inquisition in

Spain, like the *delatio* in Italy, developed a spirit of suspicion and selfishness, and broke the ties which ordinarily bind men to one another. The ancient and the modern realistic novel grew in similar soils. The resemblance which the Spanish novel bears to its Latin predecessor is still more striking. Both are rogue stories; both are autobiographical; both are based on a careful study of society. Magic, the supernatural, and the element of perilous adventure are carefully excluded. The Spaniard as well as the Italian has made free use of the folk tale. His work, like that of Petronius, has a marked element of satire in it; and it bears the same relation to the romance of chivalry that the Latin novel bears to the epic. Such a marked resemblance in treatment would on *a priori* grounds lead one to think that Mendoza and Aleman found their inspiration in the "Satiræ" of Petronius, but there seems to be no reason for supposing that either of them was familiar with the work of the Roman. The Italian and the Spanish realistic novel were spontaneous products of a similar situation.

One of the fundamental principles of modern realism as enunciated, for instance, by Zola and Howells and Garland is that the characters of the persons concerned should be revealed to the reader by their words and actions, without comment or explanation on the part of the author. This principle has been scrupulously observed by Petronius, and there is not a single instance in his novel where the artist destroys the illusion by obtruding his own personality into the scene he is painting. As for his characters, they stand out with marvelous distinctness—the roué Encolpius, the poet-aster Eumolpus, the parvenu Trimalchio, and the shrewd housewife Fortunata. Even the minor characters are portrayed with as much clearness and individuality as the figures in one of Meissonier's pictures. Let me try to convey a feeble impression from Petronius' own book of his cleverness in portraying minor characters and of the humor and sprightliness of his dialogue. The scene is a dinner party given by a parvenu. The guests are all or almost all freedmen, a rag merchant, a retired dealer in tombstones, an



after-dinner poet, and men of that type. Conversation has become general under the mellowing influence of the Falerian, and the tedious, tactless Seleucus, who has just come from a funeral, discourses in a maudlin fashion on the insignificance of man in the economy of nature, and proceeds to describe in detail the last sickness of his friend and the scenes at his funeral, until the plain speaker Phileros cuts short his lugubrious tale by remarking that the dear departed would pull a copper out of the mud with his teeth, if he got a chance, and that, having lived seventy years and left a round hundred thousand, he ought to have been satisfied. Ganymedes, the pessimist of the company, has been waiting impatiently for Phileros to bring his remarks to an end, and with that delightful inconsequence which characterizes the conversation of men of his type begins a long lament for the good old times, when the worthy Safinius flourished, whose oratorical power depended not on the new-fangled arts of logic and composition, but on the strength of his voice. With the men of that time you could play *mora* in the dark, but as for our days—well, the less said the better, and in view of the prevalent dishonesty and irreligion it's no wonder that times are bad and that the gods are rheumatic when we ask them to come to our relief. But the rag dealer, Echion, has no such gloomy views of the Fatherland. It's all in the way you look at things. In fact, if you lived somewhere else, you would be saying that pigs walked the streets here already roasted. In reality the future is very bright, for Titus is going to give a show at the amphitheatre, and there's every prospect of a fight to the finish, and it won't be anything like the show which Glyce gave with his hamstrung gladiators, who were ready to drop if you blew at them. And so the dinner goes merrily on, until the host, whose vanity grows more evident, calls for his will to be read. The reading of the will draws forth such loud wails and cries of lamentation from the slaves, who have an eye single to their own advancement, that the local fire company supposes the host's house to be on fire and comes rushing in with axes and ladders. The dinner is brought to an inglorious end. All

of this—and the whole story, in fact—is told with delightful cynicism, a sparkling wit, and with charming simplicity and lucidity of style.

Quintilian, the great Roman literary critic, confessed by implication that satire was the only new form of literature which his countrymen had produced, and critics of subsequent times have in the main accepted his *dictum*. It seems to me, however, that the Romans may successfully lay claim to the creation of prose fiction also. There is no earlier extant novel than that of Petronius, nor is there any reference in ancient literature to an earlier work of that sort, in so far as I know, so that Petronius is at the same time the creator of a new *genre* of literature and the author of one of the world's greatest pieces of realistic fiction.

FRANK FROST ABBOTT.